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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S. Policy in the Arabian Peninsula. The Committee's leadership on this topic is essential, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my expertise and assist with your mission.

An Opportunity to Reassess

As regional challenges grow thornier and the opportunity costs deepen given broader U.S. interests, now is an ideal moment to re-examine U.S. policy toward the Middle East, in particular with respect to the Arabian Peninsula. The United States must not delude itself into thinking it can fully extricate from this region. However, the Middle East is less of a priority to the United States than it once was, particularly in contrast to Asia and Europe, which must command more of our attention.

As U.S. policy currently stands, the United States exists in a kind of Middle Eastern purgatory. We are too distracted by regional crises to pivot to other global priorities but not invested enough to move the region in a better direction. This worst-of-both-worlds approach exacts a heavy price, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. It sows uncertainty among Washington's Middle Eastern partners, who act in even riskier and more aggressive ways, whether it is assassinating a journalist, detaining a sitting prime minister, or prosecuting a bloody military campaign in Yemen. It reflects the American public's frustration with the region's endless turmoil, as well as with U.S. efforts to address it. It diverts resources that could otherwise be devoted to confronting a rising China and a revanchist Russia; these opportunity costs are real and growing. And all the while, by remaining unclear about the limits of its commitments, the United States risks getting dragged into yet another Middle Eastern conflict.

Simply put, today we should focus on how and in what ways the United States can pursue a more realistic and sustainable approach toward the region, not whether we should do so. This rethinking is long overdue.

Wrestling with Regional Dilemmas

Looking ahead, U.S. policy in the Arabian Peninsula must acknowledge and respond to several key dilemmas:

How to Ruthlessly Prioritize Despite Terrorism's Pull

A superpower must make tough choices, prioritizing the conflicts and issues that matter most for its global strategy. The Middle East matters less to the United States than it has historically for three reasons: interstate conflicts that directly threatened U.S. interests in the past have largely

been replaced by sub-state security threats; other rising regions, especially Asia, have taken on more importance to U.S. global strategy; and, the diversification of global energy supplies has weakened oil as a primary driver of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Recommendations for a new U.S. approach are often binary. The maximalist version ignores the rockiness of U.S. efforts to date in places like Iraq and Libya, and dismisses how challenging it would be to sustain domestic political support for the large, long-term investments that fundamentally altering this permissive environment for terrorism and chaos would require. The minimalist version ignores the comparative advantage that America's global role has afforded it and underestimates how dangerous the power vacuum could be should Washington withdraw from the region. It is foolhardy to believe that Washington can or should pursue either approach without substantial costs in blood, treasure, and time.

The United States should focus on three key issues in the Arabian Peninsula: protecting freedom of navigation in the region's major maritime passages, preventing oil producers or troublemakers from destabilizing the flow of oil, and containing actors hostile to Washington—including terrorists. While terrorism remains a very real challenge, the United States must approach it in a smarter and more sustainable way. The U.S. government must set clear guidelines about when it will and won't use force; for example, it should clarify that it will target terrorists who threaten the United States or its partners, but will not intervene militarily in civil wars except to contain them. Above all, Washington must be cautious of what bargains it strikes in the pursuit of so-called stability with regional autocrats. For example, the current Saudi leadership's numerous irresponsible actions domestically and regionally in recent years should inspire real caution in Washington, particularly since the leadership in Riyadh remains entirely confident in its relationship with the United States despite serious missteps.

How to Recognize our Friends' Value. . .But Also Their Flaws

Allies and partners are the United States' comparative global advantage. Outsourcing regional security in places where U.S. interests are not immediately threatened can be beneficial. Indeed, the U.S. military will always fight alongside allies and key partners. Even so, some will be more capable than others and we will perennially face an expectations mismatch between our needs and capabilities, and theirs. Transforming self-interested and shortsighted regional partners into reliable long-term allies is wishful thinking—at least not without incurring enormous costs and long-term commitments.

The United States must rethink how it works with regional partners. For example, the U.S. military is fond of talking about a “by, with, and through” approach; but history shows that building militaries in weak states is not the panacea the U.S. national security community imagines it to be. As examples that span history and the globe demonstrate, American efforts to build up local security forces are an oversold halfway measure that is rarely cheap and often falls short of the desired outcome. Policymakers should not focus just on the promise and ignore the peril of outsourcing U.S. military campaigns. This maxim is particularly relevant for the Arabian Peninsula, where these partners come with overwhelming funding and complicated politics.

This model of “by, with, and through” works only if the United States is willing to acknowledge that this cooperation is a political— not technical— exercise, and if the partners on the ground

share Washington's priorities. Success requires setting realistic goals, clearly and actively communicating our expectations to our partners, and constantly assessing how well they are meeting the objectives we seek. We must be clear about the purpose and scope of these partnerships, including what the partner seeks from it, must consider how to mitigate differences, and how to recognize where they may be irreconcilable. The United States must also acknowledge the limitations of its partners and see them for what they truly are, warts and all. Sometimes, these partners won't be able to confront security challenges without direct help from the United States. In these cases, U.S. policymakers need to accept that if the effort is imperative for U.S. national security interests, Washington will have to do the work itself—particularly if that includes ensuring that problems in the Middle East don't spill over into neighboring regions. While we can't control everything regional partners will do, we can control where we set our own limits in the relationship and the support we provide.

For example, the United States has spent decades trying to build a security architecture among Gulf states; the latest incarnation is known as the Middle East Security Alliance. Even before the current Gulf rift began, this effort had started going off the rails, with many countries allowing mutual hatreds to get in the way of a cooperative effort against Iran. While such a construct could be very helpful in countering Iran, policymakers must acknowledge that long-simmering tensions over regional competition are unlikely to abate any time soon, impeding its emergence.

While Iranian bad behavior across the region is a serious problem, particularly across the Levant, the astrategic and ineptly executed Emirati and Saudi military campaign in Yemen has only benefited Tehran. There is little evidence that U.S. military support to those militaries as they wage their war in Yemen has made their execution of this conflict meaningfully more effective. And to be clear, the Iranian relationship with and support of the Houthis is much less significant than its partnership with other violent entities like Hizballah.

Even our partners will inevitably permit or even encourage the activities of terrorist groups if doing so aligns with their short-term interests. Qatar, for example, has proved willing to work with extremist groups that, at a minimum, give aid to terrorist groups with international ambitions. The United States should recognize that it cannot control everything its partners do, so it must focus efforts on discouraging their relationships with terrorist groups that might pursue operations beyond their immediate neighborhood or acquire game-changing capabilities.

How to Recalibrate U.S. Resources Despite the U.S. Military's Predominance

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. approach to the Middle East has been overwhelmingly driven by military tools. Given the nature of regional threats—and the broader security environment—this approach is both costly and increasingly ineffective.

The United States must fully adjudicate thorny tradeoffs in considering its policy towards the Arabian Peninsula. This, in turn, requires a whole of government strategy for the wider region to ensure that the United States is using its limited resources in a coordinated way to advance our interests. On key questions of U.S. policy toward the Middle East, different parts of the interagency are completely out of synch, and our military, diplomatic, and economic tools are often giving different messages. That's bad for advancing U.S. interests.

Most of the region's challenges will not be fundamentally solved by military tools, but through active diplomacy and political agreements. Executing a nuanced and effective approach requires substantial and capable staff who have meaningful regional expertise. The numerous empty ambassadorial slots at the State Department and the vacant assistant secretary role focused on this region underscore a worrisome dearth of senior and experienced diplomats to inform and execute policy toward this region. Right now, the U.S. approach is too much sword, too little pen.

Policymakers must recognize that there is no such thing as a purely operational U.S. military presence in the Middle East. In reality, U.S. military bases across the Gulf countries have strategic implications because they create a moral hazard: they encourage the region's leaders to act in ways they otherwise might not, safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes. In 2011, for example, the Bahrainis and the Saudis clearly understood the message of support sent by the U.S. naval base in Bahrain when they ignored President Obama's disapproval and crushed Shiite protests there.

Therefore, it is timely to re-think which contingencies are most consequential and necessary to prepare for in the Middle East, and how to balance those against threats posed by China and Russia. The current heavy U.S. military posture in the Gulf is based on post-September 11 threats and the Iraq war legacy, and represents a historical anomaly. This posture should shift to a smaller, dynamic and sustainable approach focused on deterring Iran, countering transnational terrorists, and securing access to strategic waterways. Furthermore, the United States should streamline its military bases in the region and shift some to "warm" status where they are primarily operated and maintained by the host country under an agreement that permits U.S. forces to surge there when needed. And, the United States will need to design a series of mitigation measures to absorb some of the risks in adjusting its regional involvement. These steps should include deeper coordination with allies in Europe and Asia who also have a stake in regional stability.

Next Steps: Recommendations to Consider

As the Committee's Members explore the way forward for U.S. policy toward the Arabian Peninsula, I would urge you to consider the following steps:

- Hold hearings and demand briefings or reports from the Administration on U.S. strategy toward the Arabian Peninsula. The State Department should outline a whole of government strategy that includes an assessment of regional dynamics, lays out key U.S. interests; articulates the ends, ways and means to pursue them, and clarifies the division of labor between departments/agencies to implement.
- Push the Administration to prioritize filling open diplomatic positions and request the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the health of the foreign service, particularly the retention rates for senior and mid-level diplomatic officials, and the tradeoffs in efficacy for political ambassadors vs. career ambassadors.

- Make active use of the Committee's role in foreign and security assistance by undertaking a strategic review with respect to the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East. This review should examine regional contingencies; U.S. military posture; when, why, and under what circumstances the United States should consider using force, including where and how to take risk; and, the impact of U.S. security assistance on regional partners' capabilities and their willingness to take on threats of mutual concern.
- Engage directly with key regional stakeholders and international allies focused on the Arabian Peninsula. This should include consultations on Gulf dynamics and Gulf security affairs with European and Asian allies, in addition to interlocutors such as UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths.

In closing, I do not recommend this approach lightly. To be sure, the Arabian Peninsula will continue to pose considerable and evolving challenges to U.S. national security. However, changing realities of the global and regional security environment paired with U.S. political and budgetary dynamics have prompted my serious reconsideration of policy options.¹

¹ This testimony includes excerpts from the following publications: Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Mara E. Karlin, "Why Military Assistance Programs Disappoint: Minor Tools Can't Solve Major Problems," *Foreign Affairs*, October 16, 2017. Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs*, December 11, 2018. Mara E. Karlin and Frances Z. Brown, "Friends With Benefits: What the Reliance on Local Partners Means for U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, May 8, 2018. Mara E. Karlin and Melissa G. Dalton, "It's Long Past Time to Rethink US Military Posture in the Gulf," *Defense One*, August 2, 2017. Mara E. Karlin and Melissa G. Dalton, "How Should the Pentagon Reshape Its Mideast Posture? Four Indicators to Watch," *Defense One*, January 20, 2018. Mara E. Karlin and Melissa G. Dalton, "Toward A Smaller, Smarter Force Posture in the Middle East," *Defense One*, August 26, 2018.